

Thinking Outside the Bay: The New York Ministers and the Salem Witch Trials

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Although New York is *today* considered the leading city of the United States, if not the world, its first hundred years of history have long been neglected in American schools—eclipsed by the ever-popular topics of Jamestown, Plymouth, the Puritans, and of course Salem. It is safe to assume that almost all ten year olds can identify Squanto and not Peter Stuyvesant. This early focus on English established colonies evolves into a general absence of colonial New York—besides the name New Amsterdam—in the general public’s mindset. The importance of understanding that hinge of land between the two early English plantations in the New World is not only an end to itself, but also a crucial part of understanding the other regions of colonial America. In the Salem witch trials, for example, letters from New York ministers in response to questions concerning the trials and witchcraft helped add another layer to what had decidedly been a New England affair. The October 1692 letters provided much needed outside opinions to the trials and brought a significant climax to a wave of growing criticism within New England itself. They were an integral part of the ending of the proceedings in Massachusetts by Governor Phips and influential in his vindication of those already condemned. The involvement of the New York ministry near the time of the Essex County witch trials’ ending came unexpectedly. Why did a staunchly Puritan community of faith decide to consult Dutch and French Calvinist ministers and even an Anglican chaplain from another colony? To help answer such questions, one must understand what was going on in New England at the time, and who the New York ministers were.

Differences in opinion existed among the New England clergy at the time of the trials—notably, between Increase Mather and Cotton Mather. Increase Mather’s *Cases of Conscience*, published as the trials drew to a close, criticized the use of spectral evidence, and implicitly attacked the trials that Cotton Mather would defend in print a year later in *Wonders of the*

Invisible World. Samuel Willard, another important critic of the trials, along with thirteen other ministers, all backed *Cases of Conscience* without the later postscript, which helped bridge the divide in thought with Cotton Mather.¹ Thomas Brattle wrote a letter on October 8, 1692 claiming that many of the Boston elite opposed the trials.² Perhaps the outside opinion of the New York clergymen had served as the tipping point needed to end the proceedings.

It was in this climate that Joseph Dudley, a Massachusetts council member at the time and future governor, sought the advice of the New York ministers. He was not only a member of the Church of England, but utilized his connections to the government in England for his positions there and in the colonies.³ As the former chief justice of New York, Dudley must have been acquainted with at least some of the ministers to whom he sent the letters. They were all part of the same social circle and even held the same political views. Dudley's main trial as judge was Jacob Leisler's. Leisler had led a political uprising against the English-dominated ruling class of New York a few years after the dissolution of the Dominion of New England.⁴ Dudley and all of the New York ministers were anti-Leisler. Dudley, who probably saw aligning himself with the growing resistance to the witch trials at home as a political gain, sought advice from men he felt connected to. It does not seem wrong to assume he and others expected their response—namely, a diplomatic criticism that supported the opposition already present in New England.

¹ Evan Haefeli, "Dutch New York and the Salem Witch Trials: Some New Evidence," *Proceedings of the American Antiquarian Society* 110 (2000): 278-9.

² Thomas Brattle, 'Letter,' in George Lincoln Burr, ed. *Narratives of the Witchcraft Cases, 1648-1706* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1914) 184.

³ Philip Ranlet, "Dudley, Joseph," *American National Biography Online* (2000): <http://www.anb.org/articles/01/01-00234.html>. Accessed on December 2, 2010.

⁴ David William Voorhees, "Leisler, Jacob," *American National Biography Online* (2000): <http://www.anb.org/articles/01/01-00822.html>. Accessed on December 2, 2010.

The Anglican minister Johannes (John) Miller received and responded to his own letter of seven questions. Rev. Miller was the chaplain to the royal forces in the New York province from 1692-1695.⁵ Although the articles of capitulation of the Dutch in 1664 to the English increased the official presence of the Church of England in the royal colony, Miller was the only Episcopal clergyman.⁶ That he gave his opinion separately from the other four ministers, in addition to the possibility that he received his own request, spoke to his nominal importance as the chief representative of the Church of England in New York.⁷

The second letter in response to questions concerning the trial was undersigned “in our church congress 11 October, 1692” by the clergymen Henricus Selijns, Petrus Peiretus, Godfrey Dellius, and Rudolph Varich (the Latinized versions of Henry Selijns, Pierre Peiret, Godfrey Dellius, and Rudolph van Varick).⁸ These names did not carry the same historical weight as ecclesiastical New England stalwarts Cotton and Increase Mather and, later, Jonathan Edwards. Yet the New York ministers were also renowned leaders of their time. These four ministers were even more respected theologians and pastoral leaders than Miller. Miller’s *New York Considered and Improved*, his important survey of seventeenth century New York, provided a table of the various religions and ministers found in the province. Selijns, Peiret, Dellius, and van Varick

⁵ John Miller, *New York Considered and Improved* (Cleveland, 1903), 123-25.

⁶ John Miller, *A Description of the Province and City of New York; with Plans of the City and Several Forts as they Existed in the year 1695* (New York: W. Gowans, 1862), 100.

⁷ George Lincoln Burr Papers, Misc. Witchcraft notes, box 38, Cornell University Archives, Kroch Library. In this photocopy of his original Latin response in the Cornell witchcraft collection he addressed seven questions as opposed to the eight questions asked of the other New York ministers. The Latin wording in the questions also differs between the questions associated with the two parties. Such differences lead me to believe that two separate letters were sent.

⁸ Abner C. Goodell Jr., “Letter from Sir William Phips and other Papers relating to Witchcraft, including Questions to Ministers and their Answers,” *Proceedings of the Massachusetts Historical Society* Vol. 1 (1884): 353.

were all included in the chart as the main (and sometimes only) leaders for their respective religions and locations.⁹

Dr. Selijns was the premier church leader in former New Amsterdam and early New York City. Ordained in Amsterdam in 1660, he held various posts—despite returning to Europe a few times—in Brooklyn, Harlem, and the chapel in the Fort, to name a few. He also preached and taught the catechism throughout the entire area. He was considered a “man of learning and a poet,” and his influence went beyond the Dutch realm both in Europe and America. Cotton Mather, the preeminent New England minister, must have thought highly enough of Selijns’ in order to include his poetic preface in his book, *Magnalia Christi Americana* (1702). Selijns’ studies in Leiden, which were influenced by the forward-thinking theologian Johannes Cocceius, would have served as a foundation for the relatively open-minded tone of his letter. Selijns was also known as a strong defender of the church’s affairs from the influence of magistrates. This also implied his support for church involvement in court matters concerning religion. Selijns must have been quite willing to give advice on the events in Salem.

Besides his theological and pastoral renown, Selijns was also a part of the early New York elite, as many successful clergymen were. He secured this position with his marriage in 1686 to the widow of Cornelis Steenwyck, the wealthiest New York citizen while living. The decade leading up to his signing of the Salem letter was marked by an increasing English presence in the province, yet Selijns diplomatically secured the Dutch church on equal footing. His personal success and political connections, as well as his inter-religious relations (he was co-officiator for the installation of the first permanent Anglican minister in New York) brought him

⁹ Miller, *A Description of the Province and City of New York*, 207.

more clout than enemies.¹⁰ If any New York minister's opinion was valued, let alone sought, it would have been Selijns'.

The second minister from New York, Pierre Peiret, was a French Calvinist who had arrived for his post in New York in early November, 1687. Peiret was a visiting minister in New Jersey and the Hudson Valley, though his main position began at the shared church in the Fort. He appeared as the chief French minister in the province, and helped form the official church in 1692 after a wave of Huguenot refugees arrived from Europe.¹¹ In fact, the leading Dutch clergyman Selijns remarked in a letter dated October 12, 1692 (a day after penning the letter to New England) that "our French ministerial brethren are doing well...their congregation grow not a little almost daily...[and] the two French churches have been united," with the Domine Peiret having presided over the new church.¹² Histories of that united, French Church of the Holy Spirit in New York depicted Peiret as well liked and his ministry as successful. His signing of various French-oriented petitions as well as general documents also represented his leadership position in New York as a whole.¹³

The third of the letter's signers was another influential and well-known minister, Godfrey Dellius. As domine of the Reformed Dutch Church in Albany, Dellius was the pre-eminent cleric in the fortified settlement. His ministry spanned from 1682 to 1699 and was marked by his involvement with the Mohawk Indians in the surrounding area as well as his securing of large tracts of land. These, along with his success with his own congregants, formed the basis for his

¹⁰ David William Voorhees, "Selijns, Henricus," *American National Biography Online* (2000): <http://www.anb.org/articles/01/01-00822.html>. Accessed on November 18, 2010.

¹¹ John A. F. Maynard, *The Huguenot Church of New York: a History of the French Church of Saint Esprit* (New York: unknown, 1938), 67.

¹² Anonymous, *Appendix to History of New Paltz* (Blatimore: Genealogical Publishing Co., Inc., 1973), 4.

¹³ E. B. O'Callaghan, *The Documentary History of the State of New-York* (Albany: unknown, 1849), 412-3.

image as an accomplished spiritual leader and member of the land-owning elite. This latter status also helped to align him with, among others, the first official Anglican minister of New York, Reverend Vesey of Trinity Church. Both men were keen on seeing that a move against large land-holdings be stopped and Dellius even went to beseech the king in England.¹⁴ Though that occurred seven years after his involvement with the letter, it signified his importance and special connections within New York society. As a Calvinist leader Dellius was equally triumphant. His rapport with Indians was shown in the letters of thanks from the Mohawks for his services to them. Dellius was also especially influential in preventing various conflicts around Albany between the Mohawks and white settlers.¹⁵ Though Dellius did have some detractors for his conspicuous acquisition of land and his political stances, he was a powerful clergyman. His own congregation and Protestant and Catholic clergymen from both sides of the Atlantic all esteemed him.¹⁶ Not only was Dellius widely known he was also clearly well traveled. Besides his vast area of preaching around the Albany interior he also spent time in New Jersey, Long Island, and even Boston just two years before he was part of the group of ministers called on to give advice.¹⁷

The final minister, Dr. Rudolph van Varick, was a Dutch reformed minister in Brooklyn; he was based in Flatbush, though he traveled to the various towns to preach on cycle.¹⁸ His lack of presence in historical documents does not accurately reflect his importance. Although he was

¹⁴ George Howard Duffield, *The Tangier Smith Manor of St. George: address* (Baltimore: unknown, 1921), 23.

¹⁵ Anonymous, *Our Two Hundred and Fifty Years*, 21.; Arthur James Weise, *The History of the City of Albany, New York: from the Discovery of the Great River in 1524, by Verrazano, to the Present Time* (Albany: E.H. Bender, 1884), 351.

¹⁶ Miller, *A Description of the Province and City of New York*, 105.

¹⁷ Anonymous, *Our Two Hundred and Fifty Years*, 14.

¹⁸ Miller, *A Description of the Province and City of New York*, 207; Martha J. Lamb, *History of the city of New York: its Origin, Rise and Progress* (New York: A.S. Barnes and Co., 1896), 61.

clearly the least influential of his fellow signers, his report on the new French congregation in New York, as well his old age at the time of the letter (he died in 1694) demonstrated the respect that his contemporaries afforded him.¹⁹

The eight questions asked to the one French and three Dutch ministers followed a logical progression from broad topics to specifics pertinent to the Salem cases:

1. Whether...some women...have given themselves wholly to the service of the Devil...to exercise their malice against their fellow-men?
2. Where[in] does the...nature of Witchcraft...truly consist?
3. Whether in order to convict of Witchcraft by Diabolical and preternatural acts towards the tormented, it is necessary to prove previous malice...or whether these are to be reasonably presumed, [as] in most cases?
4. Whether the specter...of one who has previously neither shown malice nor made threats...is sufficient for a just conviction of a witch?
5. Whether giving the Devil permission to place before the eyes or the imagination of the afflicted the forms and figures of innocent persons...consistent with the holy government of...God?
6. Further, whether or not such an apparition is of itself sufficient for a just conviction of witchcraft?
7. Whether a serious accusation by the afflicted is sufficient to prove witchcraft, against a long continued consistent, just, Christian life...where no previous malice is made known?
8. Whether or not those who are...tortured by continual pains...and threatened with many miseries, through several months, are worn out...or suffer even a great loss of their natural spirits...? Finally, whether this does not furnish grave cause for suspicion that the Devil has exhibited an illusion...?²⁰

The first question asked if witches of *malice* had always existed and continued to exist, “so abandoned by God?”²¹ The learned New York ministers responded with a pre-Enlightenment proof of God and thus the devil’s existence. Citing specific ‘historical’ examples and two Dutch volumes on contemporary witchcraft, they echoed the New Englanders’ belief that the devil tempted certain humans. The following two questions addressed the nature of witchcraft and the

¹⁹ Maynard, *The Huguenot Church of New York*, 63.

²⁰ Goodell, “Letter from Sir William Phips and other Papers relating to Witchcraft,” 345. The ellipses are my own.

²¹ Goodell, “Letter from Sir William Phips and other Papers relating to Witchcraft,” 353-8.

need for proof of intent. Their response that witches and the devil formed a relationship of mutual need was not a challenge to historical witchcraft sentiments. Their answer to the question of intent, however, began to depart from tradition. They asserted that everyone was capable of both harboring and concealing evil thoughts. It seemed that the first two questions were neutral and introductory, whereas questions three through eight were more weighty and pertinent to the trials.

Perhaps the most important of all the questions was whether spectral evidence had any weight in a trial. The Essex County witch trials were notorious for their reliance on spectral evidence for convictions. The four ministers rejected spectral evidence since the devil could “assume the shape of a good man, and presents this shape before the eyes of the afflicted, as the source of the afflictions,” while the real perpetrator went unnoticed. Their response to question five, that the devil could use innocent people as instruments of affliction—God’s supremacy meant he could do justice how he saw fit—did not contradict their previous statement, which only concerned specters. To make this clearer in their sixth point they said “to declare such a man as a wizard for the reason that his specter is presented to the afflicted...would be the greatest imprudence.” They further criticized the proceedings of the Salem trials, by claiming that any judge who did not act cautiously and adroitly might have “rashly favor[ed] the purpose and cunning of the devil,” because the devil was known to be capable of deceit, torment, and murder.²²

Another worrisome topic, whether people with a history of good, Christian living could be convicted on the grounds of a serious enough accusation from the afflicted, was also raised in the questions. The New York ministers gave a diplomatic ‘yes and no’ answer. They defended

²² Goodell, “Letter from Sir William Phips and other Papers relating to Witchcraft,” 357.

those who lived a good, Christian lifestyle by saying that devilish people could not easily maintain such a way of living. This held that a truly innocent life was grounded in something deeper than a façade. On the other hand, they also stated that grave testimony against such ‘innocent’ people should not be automatically taken as false—perhaps the devil could have used his deceit under an illusion of good morals. The ministers protected the integrity of both good, Christian people and the testimonies heard in cases in this response. The final question asked whether those afflicted must be visibly weakened and harmed after a period of time. The ministers, citing an example of a person who had acted even better than normal because of affliction, contended that it was possible to show no signs of suffering of the body and soul in the long-term.²³

The seven questions posed to Reverend Miller, and answered solely by him, maintained the tenor of the above-discussed answers, including a repudiation of spectral evidence in court with his own increased focus on the devils’ many deceptions. Miller took his view of the Salem trials one step beyond the other ministers, going as far as to say that the afflicted were most likely not “maliciously enchanted by any sorcerer, but deluded by the devil to promote the misery and ruin of the human race,” which also spoke against the other ministers’ assertion that the devil and evildoers formed an alliance.²⁴

One could have questioned how the four Dutch and French ministers received their letter from Dudley on October 5 and generated a response in only six days. Howard Hageman rationalized the response’s speed by arguing that Selijns composed the letter himself and

²³ *ibid.*, “Letter from Sir William Phips and other Papers relating to Witchcraft,” 353-8.

²⁴ George Lincoln Burr Papers, Misc. Witchcraft notes, box 38, Cornell University Archives, Kroch Library, as cited in Mary Beth Norton, *In the Devil’s Snare* (New York: Vintage Books, 2003), 287.

included the other ministers as signatories.²⁵ The impact of both letters from New York, however, did not rest on their execution, but on their reception in Massachusetts. The letters of responses were dated in New York as October 11. Since the colony in New York used the Gregorian calendar, or ‘New Style’ of dating, it was plausible for the letters to have reached Phips by October 12 in Massachusetts. Massachusetts used the Julian calendar, or ‘Old Style’ of dating, and was roughly ten calendar days behind New York. Assuming that the dates written on the responses from the ministers were written in New Style, they completed their answers October 11, which was actually October 1 in Massachusetts. Eleven days would have been sufficient for the message to be received by Dudley and related to Phips in time for the suspension of part of the special court of Oyer and Terminer on the twelfth. They would also have been received in time for his letter to London on the twelfth, in which he distanced himself from the trials. Dating errors may have also occurred. The true dates of when the clergymen wrote their letters and when Massachusetts received them could have been lost along with the original copies of the letters themselves, and the dates may have been added in later, simply by approximation and not fact. This may explain why two separate letters, with two different sets of questions (though to the same effect) were responded to by four ministers and one Anglican chaplain in the same time period and sent out on the same day.²⁶

There was yet, another minister, one Rev. John Kerfbijl—an elder in Selijns’ church—who may have also been influential in the ending of the trials. Evan Haefeli provided an interesting, albeit not fully convincing argument for Kerfbijl’s involvement, by using the letterbook of Jacob Melyen.²⁷ Melyen was a Dutch merchant from New Amsterdam and

²⁵ Howard Hageman, “Domines and Witches,” *De Halve Maen* 63 (1990): 4-5.

²⁶ See fn. 5, above.

²⁷ Haefeli, “Dutch New York and the Salem Witch Trials,” 277-308.

Connecticut, who lived in Boston. Some of his letters asked Rev. Kerfbijl about literature on witchcraft as well as for opinions on the Salem trials. Melyen continued the theme of persons seeking ministerial advice about the trials. Melyen personally knew Kerfbijl and both were pro-Leisler. The New York minister even fled to Boston in 1690 as the anti-Leisler climate increased. It seemed that those who opposed the events in New England looked to garner outside clarification or support from people with whom they had already been aligned. Melyen responded to his New York minister friend with the cryptic message: the trials of “witchcraft is going to be halted. A result of your letter. Many are thankful to you.”²⁸ Some have construed this to mean that one of Kerfbijl’s letters to Melyen, though no copies of them have lasted, was as influential as the other letters discussed above.²⁹ Even if Melyen were telling the truth, his English inflected Dutch may have meant you and your as in all of the New York ministers, not just singular Kerfbijl. The most likely explanation was that there were a number of similar letters circulating towards the end of the trials.

The trials did not end overnight. The Court of Oyer and Terminer was suspended on October 12, and fully disbanded on the twenty-ninth of the month.³⁰ Some trials concerning those previously indicted in the special court continued in 1693. Phips’ decisions to suspend and later dismantle the special court, however, were momentous occasions in their own right and the beginning of the end for the trials. His actions must have logically followed the growing tide of resistance to the trials. He would have covered his bases and felt enough general support for ending the trials to do so. Any letters at that time, especially the ones from New York, were essential for his decision. The New York letters stand out because they would have been

²⁸ Jacob Melyen, Letterbook, 1691-1696, American Antiquarian Society, as cited in Haefeli, “Dutch New York and the Salem Witch Trials,” 305-8.

²⁹ Haefeli, “Dutch New York and the Salem Witch Trials,” 277-8.

³⁰ Norton, *In the Devil’s Snare*, 288-9.

received right around the time of the formal trials' ending. The fact that they offered outside opinion crucially cemented the influence of opposition in New England. Cotton Mather gave the most credit to the letters from the one French and three Dutch ministers for the vindication of people who were still held as convicted even after the special court ended. In his the *Life of Sir William Phips* Mather asserted that Phips "first reprieved, and then pardoned many of them that had been condemned," after "deliberate review" of the Dutch and French ministers' letter.³¹

The letters provided a crucial objection to one of the main markers of the trials at Salem—spectral evidence—and implicitly offered criticism of the trials as a whole. Though the separation of church and state matters was a Puritan ideal from the beginning of English settlement in New England, for the witch trials—a court matter very much concerned with the spiritual—the case was different. Ministers had offered both support and criticism at various levels over the course of the Salem trials in particular. A parallel of seeking advice from clergy can be found in the 1692 Fairfield case of two women suspected of witchcraft. The ministers there dismissed tenuous evidence such as ducking and spectral evidence. More important, however, were the magistrates' opinions on the same case and their allusion to the misled witch-trials at Salem: "As for the common thing of spectral evidence...[is] discarded and...abominated by the most judicious." They continued to make their point by referencing the misuse of such evidence and declared, "the Bay for adhering to these last mentioned litigious things is warning enough."³²

The involvement of the New York clergymen in the Essex County trials also illuminated the religious and ethnic spectrum of the time and the often-overlooked social web that existed

³¹ Cotton Mather, *The Life of Sir William Phips* (New York: Covici-Friede Inc., 1929), 149.

³² David D. Hall, *Witch-Hunting in Seventeenth Century New England: A Documentary History 1638-1693* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1999), 348-53.

between the colonies. To many people today there exists an image of seventeenth century America as small, closed-off towns and solitary frontiers. As the above demonstrated, there actually existed a network of individuals between various towns, colonies, and even countries. People in similar professions (ie. the ministers) and political persuasions (ie. Leisler and anti-Leisler) found connections and communication beyond their local community. Between these communities also existed commonalities, which were treated in various ways, such as Indians. Both New York and New England had Indian conflicts, and Delliuss' Albany was completely fortified. Yet there seemed to be less hostility towards Indians in New York, where they were both an integral part of trade and people to be converted. The religion of all the New York clergymen, despite Miller, was as Calvinist on the surface as that of the leading New England ministers. Yet all the New York ministers opposed the trials—in a relatively less biblically conservative fashion. Since the ministers were leaders in their community it would seem that the overlying tone of New York religion was less stringent than that of New England's. Whether the different ethnicities and religions represented in New York caused that difference, or the relative progressivism of Dutch theological thought and Anglicanism to Puritanism, these letters served as a lens with which to look at religion. Religion did not inform society and rampant Puritanism did not create the Essex county trials. Rather, society and its context informed religion and how it was used to understand and deal with events.

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